



Health and Welfare
Canada

Santé et Bien-être social
Canada

We need to know about AIDS

A Guide for Parents on Talking with Their Children about AIDS

CAI

HW

- Z 332



3 1761 11555897 5



Published by authority of the Minister of National Health and Welfare
1991

Egalement disponible en français sous le titre

"Des mots pour le dire... Le SIDA : Comment en parler à ses enfants"

©Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1991

Cat. No. H43-53/9-1991E

ISBN 0-662-18482-3


We need to know about AIDS



This booklet has been written to help you talk with your children about AIDS. It provides the basic facts about AIDS and HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. It also contains suggestions on how to discuss these facts with your children.

This material is not meant to promote any values or lifestyles. You are the parent. You know what is best for your child.

Health and Welfare Canada appreciates the cooperation and support of the Canadian Home and School and Parent-Teacher Federation and from the Commission nationale des parents francophones in distributing this booklet to other parents across the country.

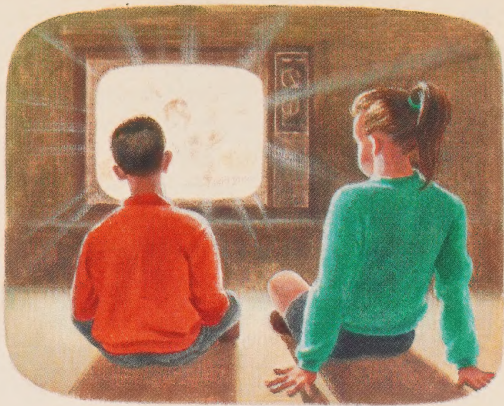


Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
University of Toronto

We need to know about AIDS

"We get most of our information from television since parents are so uncomfortable with the topic. But you can't count on kids watching AIDS programs on television, and friends are not a reliable source of information."

**Grade 11 Student, Canada
Youth and AIDS Study, 1988**



Why Talk about AIDS and Sex

Children and teenagers need to know about AIDS:

1. To reduce their fears about the disease.
2. To satisfy their natural curiosity.
3. To reassure children who may know friends or family who have been affected by AIDS or HIV infection.
4. To help delay the beginning of sexual activity.
5. To encourage the use of condoms and safer sex practices if children are already sexually active.
6. To understand and eliminate the risks associated with drugs that require needles for injection.
7. To teach them to have a healthy attitude about sexuality and love.



What should they know?

Pre-School (3-4 years)

Children at this age are learning about their bodies and the world through play. They can learn simple healthy routines such as bathing, brushing their teeth, and eating good food. A parent can let the child know that sex is one of the things that can be talked about in their home.

Young Children (5-8 years)

Young children are interested in birth, marriage and death. They have probably heard about AIDS on TV, and they may have questions or fears. They need to know that they shouldn't worry about getting AIDS and that people do not get HIV from being bad. They can understand basic ideas from simple examples such as getting germs into a cut.

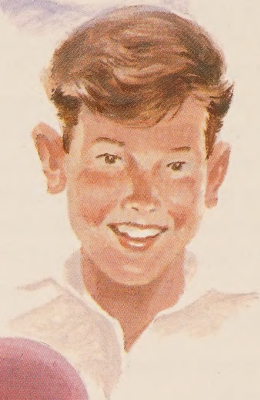
Pre-Teens (9-12 years)

The pre-teen years are when the changes of puberty begin. Pre-teens are concerned about their bodies, their looks and what is normal. Some may start dating, have early sexual experiences or try drugs. Parents need to talk to them about sexuality, AIDS and drugs. Their natural curiosity about sexuality needs to be addressed through accurate information, using the correct words for the different parts of the body. They need to know what is meant by sexual intercourse, how HIV is spread, how to avoid risky behaviors and why taking drugs is dangerous.



Teens (13-19 years)

This can be a time of confusion or conflict. Teenagers need to know that the best way to prevent HIV is to avoid sexual intercourse or using drugs. Parents should share their values about premarital sexual intercourse. We should recognize that, although we want them to, many will not wait. They need to know about condoms, birth control, and alternative forms of sexual behavior such as kissing, holding hands, masturbation, and sexual activity that does not include sexual intercourse. Teens need to know how drugs and alcohol affect their judgement. They also need to know about the high risk of sharing needles through injection drug use, steroids, ear piercing and tattooing. Young people often have a homosexual experimentation phase and, therefore, may be worried about AIDS.



What is AIDS?

It's the **Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome**. A serious illness that harms the body's ability to fight infections.

What is HIV?

AIDS is caused by a germ or virus. The AIDS virus is called the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is HIV that is spread from one person to another. Actually, HIV is the thing we should worry most about because it is the germ or virus. AIDS is the disease that may develop once a person has been infected with HIV.

How is HIV spread?

Research shows that HIV is mainly spread:

- Through sexual intercourse with an infected person.
- By sharing an infected needle or syringe.

HIV can also be spread through blood transfusions (although this is highly unlikely because all blood is now tested) and from an infected mother to her baby, before, during, or after birth.

Research also shows that you can't get HIV from:

- sneezing or coughing
- sitting next to someone
- touching or shaking hands
- using toilets, water fountains, or telephones
- sharing tools or equipment
- eating in the cafeteria
- swimming in a pool or showering in a locker-room

The Facts About AIDS/HIV:

- As of December 1990, there were over 4,000 cases of AIDS in Canada. An estimated 50,000 Canadians have the virus (HIV).
- Over 20% of people with AIDS are aged 20-29. Many of these people were probably infected as teenagers.
- As of December 1990, 15 cases of AIDS among teenagers (15-19) were reported in Canada.
- There were 54 cases of AIDS among children (0-4 years) as of December 1990.
- Heterosexual, as well as homosexual, women and men can get AIDS/HIV.

AIDS, sex, drugs and youth

Two important scientific studies provide us with a lot of information about the sexual behavior of Canadian adults and youth. Let's begin with the adults because, as we all know, young people are influenced by what adults do as well as what they say.

A **Gallup Sexual Lifestyle Survey** completed in September 1988 reported that:

- 86% of adult Canadians have had sexual intercourse.
- Of the 18 to 24 age bracket, 70% had their first sexual experience before they were 18.
- Of the 25 to 44 age bracket, 40% had their first sexual experience before they were 18.
- Of those who had sexual intercourse, 28% have had one partner, 9% have had 2 partners, 13% have had 3 or 4 partners, 26% have had 5 or more partners and 25% don't know how many partners they have had in their lifetime.

The **Canada Youth and AIDS Study** is the first large national study of youth sexual behavior in Canada. Over 38,000 young people in grades 7, 9, 11 and first-year college and university, as well as drop-outs were surveyed. Here are some of the results of young people reporting at least one experience with:

Petting Below the Waist

Grade 9

- Males – 61%
- Females – 53%

Grade 11

- Males – 75%
- Females – 73%

College/University

- Males – 89%
- Females – 87%

Oral and Anal Sex

Oral Sex -Drop-Outs

- Males – 73%
- Females – 64%

College/University

- Males – 68%
- Females – 64%

Anal Sex -Drop-Outs

- Males – 15%
- Females – 20%

College/University

- Males – 14%
- Females – 16%

Sexual Intercourse

Grade 9

- Males – 31%
- Females – 21%

Grade 11

- Males – 49%
- Females – 46%

College/University

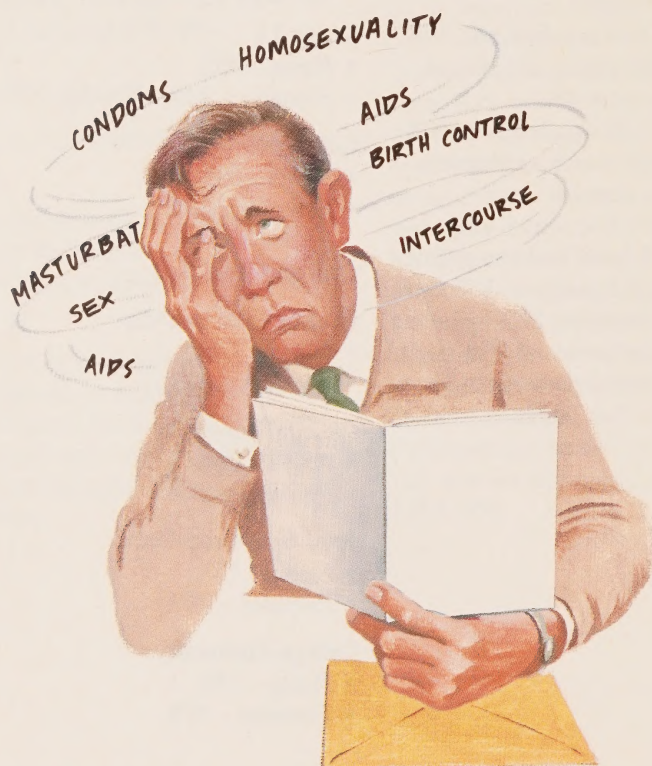
- Males – 77%
- Females – 73%

Drug and Alcohol Use

Alcohol and drug use increase the risk of getting AIDS/HIV because they affect the good judgement of people.

In 1988, 53% of 15- to 19-year-old males and 36% of females used alcohol on a weekly basis; on average, these males consumed 5 or more drinks per week.

(Source: Canada Health Promotion Survey, 1988)



We need to talk about AIDS



"O.K., everyone in this house please stand advised that I, Thomas P. Thompson, have on this date made a complete fool of myself in Sex Education class by repeating elaborate stories concerning storks told to me by certain parties residing herein."

Talking about AIDS or sex is not always easy. But when you talk to your children about AIDS, sexuality and other sensitive issues, you are also telling them that you care about their health and happiness.

Many of us have never talked with our children about AIDS and sex, so it may be slow to begin. Don't worry if you or your children feel a little uncomfortable. It will get easier with practice. So why not give it a try?

Let's talk about talking

"But it's hard to talk with my child."

Talking with our children is not always easy, particularly when they become teenagers.

Teenagers worry about acne, weight problems, menstruation, late or early physical development, sex, school pressures, boredom, parental hassles, friendships and money problems.

Parents find it hard to keep up with teenage mood swings and normal challenges to authority as teens bounce back and forth between childhood and adulthood.

But, despite the difficulties, parents and their teenaged children do find ways to talk to each other. Be patient with yourself and your children.

"But I'm uncomfortable talking about AIDS and sex."

It is normal to be uncomfortable talking about the difficult issues associated with AIDS and sex. There is a lot of complex information to be learned about AIDS. We also have to examine our own feelings about safe sex, drug use, homosexuality and dealing with illness and death. Discussions about sex may lead to questions about topics such as masturbation, birth control, and our own sexual behaviors.

But, as we talk about these things we gradually forget about being uncomfortable. The information becomes easier to understand. By talking about our feelings, we help our children express their feelings. Difficult subjects become easier to handle.

Tips About Talking

Some Suggestions:

- Try to listen calmly, even when there may be a difference of opinion.
- Ask for opinion, not for personal disclosure.
- Be willing to "back off" and agree to discuss the topic again later.
- Use a lot of "little talks" rather than one "big talk".
- You, the parent, should take the initiative.

Some Suggestions:

- Don't be afraid to say that you feel embarrassed. Often just saying so will make you and your child more comfortable.
- Answer questions when they come up – there may not be another time.
- Don't try to cover all of the issues at one time.
- Talk it over with your spouse/partner or friends before talking with your child.
- Respect each other's privacy. Make it clear that you want to discuss information and opinions – not their or your personal experiences.

“Doesn’t talking about sex lead to having sex?”

Some people worry that discussing sex with their children will encourage their children to become sexually active.

Research shows that children who are well informed and comfortable in talking about sexuality are least likely to have sexual intercourse when they are adolescents.

“But I don’t know enough about AIDS and HIV.”

AIDS is a difficult topic. You may not have all the information, or your child may ask questions to which there may be several answers or even no answers.

But there are lots of places and people to provide the information you need.

“But my family is different, our values are not the same as other people’s.”

Parents and children sometimes feel pressured by the actions or beliefs of other people which are different from their own. The key is to help your child recognize that other people may have different beliefs, customs and views, but to explain openly that you want them to act in a certain way.

Some Suggestions:

- Talk often with your child about sensitive issues.
- Encourage your school to offer a sexuality education program.
- Encourage your place of worship to offer youth programs on sexuality.

Some Suggestions:

- You don’t need to know all the answers. Say that you need to look it up.
- Take a “time-out”. Say, “That’s a good question. I need to think about my answer for a while.”
- You can make mistakes. Say, “I thought about my answer to your question yesterday and want to change something.”

Some Suggestions:

- Be clear and honest about your beliefs and values.
- Make sure your behavior is consistent with your values.
- Point out positive behaviors as well as those which are negative or exploitive.
- Make sure your child understands what is acceptable to you.
- Recognize that other people’s standards may be different from yours.

More about talking...

Here are a few ways to encourage your child to continue a discussion.

Door Openers

"What do you think?"

"That's a good question."

"I don't know, but I'll find out."

"I'm trying to understand what you're feeling."

"Do you know what that word means?"

"I'm glad you told me about that."



These answers usually discourage discussion with your child or teenager.

Door Closers

"You're too young."

"Where did you hear that?"

"If you say that word again, I'll..."

"That's none of your business."

"I don't care what your friends are doing."

"That's just for boys (girls)."

"We'll talk about that when you need to know."



Getting started...

Set the scene...

- Choose a time when you and your child are relaxed and have time to talk.
- Talk when you are doing some activity with your child such as travelling in the car, preparing a meal, doing the dishes or doing chores around the house.
- Leave a book or magazine article on AIDS/HIV around the house for your child to read.
- Give a book or magazine article on AIDS/HIV to your child and ask for his or her opinion.
- Post a newspaper clipping on the fridge and then start a conversation about it.
- Before you talk, find out about AIDS/HIV at your local library or by calling local health services.
- Introduce the topic. Even though you may get an "Oh Dad/Mum!" or "Yucch!", it doesn't necessarily mean your child knows it all or doesn't want to talk.



For Openers...

Here are some ways to start talking about AIDS/HIV:

- What have you been learning about AIDS in school?
- I heard a report on the news last night about AIDS. Do you ever talk about AIDS with your friends?
- I read an article that said sharing needles is causing the AIDS virus to spread really quickly. Did they talk to you about AIDS in school?
- Somebody at work said his daughter's class discussed condoms. Have you had any information about that in your class?
- Do you ever think about AIDS?

Teachable moments...

Teachable moments are good times in everyday life to talk about issues such as AIDS:

- at the end of a TV or radio show that has mentioned AIDS;
- when telling your child about an article you have just read on AIDS;
- when somebody gives some information about AIDS which is wrong.



Answering their questions

Three Rules to Follow

1. Listen carefully
2. Give a simple answer
3. Check to see if they understand

Children will ask questions about AIDS/HIV and sex for different reasons. Thinking about why the question is being asked will help in giving a good answer.

1. General curiosity and seeking information.

These questions are fairly simple and usually have been caused by a natural curiosity.

Examples include: "What is AIDS?", "How do people get AIDS", "Why do people die?"

Answer in a factual way, providing information according to the age of the child or teen.



2. Worry for his/her welfare.

Many children may be frightened by the things they hear about AIDS on the news or from other people.

Examples might include: "Do children get AIDS?", or "What kind of people get AIDS?"

Answer by describing how the disease is spread. Young children should be reassured that they probably won't get AIDS. Teens should be told how to avoid risky behaviors.

3. Worry about their parents, family or friends.

Family members are very important to young children. They hear that people get AIDS by having sex or using drugs, and perhaps they know that their parents have sex or use alcohol, marijuana or other drugs. Teenagers may be concerned about friends or family members.

Examples include: "Mommy, will you get AIDS?", or "What is safe sex?"

Answer by describing how the disease is spread. Teenagers can be asked to comment on the different risk behaviors and whether they apply to some of their friends.

4. Seeking reactions from adults.

It is hard to talk about AIDS and sometimes young people will ask questions to see how adults react.

Examples include: asking about their parents' behavior, using bad words, or asking questions which "label" people.

Answer by first asking questions about the question. For example: "Do only fags get AIDS?" Answer: "What did you mean by fags?" or "Why did you use that word?"

Or, you can reword the question using better words. For example: "Do only homosexuals get AIDS?" Then answer: "No, heterosexuals also get AIDS."

Some Common Questions Asked about AIDS/HIV

- What is AIDS?
- What are injection drugs?
- What is a germ?
- What is sharing needles?
- What is sex?
- Can my cat get AIDS?
- How do you get AIDS?
- Is it safe to play with someone who has AIDS?
- Does AIDS hurt?
- What is a condom?
- What does GAY mean?
- How do you know if you have AIDS?
- What is a blood transfusion?
- Do bad people get AIDS?
- Do children get AIDS?
- Can people with AIDS get better?
- Can AIDS be cured?
- What is semen?
- How many people have AIDS?



Handling those difficult questions

Think about how you would handle these situations.

A child is worried about friends, neighbours or family who are at risk or who are HIV-infected.

Consider discussing the situation with a nurse or doctor before talking with your child.

However, if your child asks about AIDS and is worried about someone, you should consider these guidelines:

- Always be honest.
- Don't burden the child with things he or she can't control.
- Explain that household routines or friendships may be changed because people are upset.
- Give a message of hope. Say, "Yes, Mrs. Smith has AIDS. But her doctor thinks she is okay now and we hope she will stay strong."

A parent is worried about their teen's behavior.

- Be honest and direct. Begin by saying, "I am worried that you may get HIV through sexual intercourse or by using an infected needle to take drugs." (Don't accuse or lecture your child.)
- State your views and preferences. "I hope you will avoid having sexual intercourse. If not, I hope you will use a condom. And please, don't use drugs."
- Offer alternatives. "If you are going to have sex, please use a condom or try sexual behaviors other than intercourse."

A child is worried about the parent's behavior.

- Clear up any misunderstandings. For example, you can't catch HIV through casual contact.
- Say that you appreciate his or her concern and that you know it comes from love for you. Establish a rule for your discussion which respects your right to privacy and your child's right to be concerned.
- Have your child express his or her fear. Reassure him or her that you will take care of yourself.
- Think about your behavior. Are you placing yourself at risk?

F*ind more information, get some help*

The local health unit or hospital

You can call or visit your local health clinic. It should have pamphlets and books for you to read. You can also get help from trained nurses, doctors and social workers there.

Local community groups

Many groups such as Home and School Associations, Planned Parenthood, the Red Cross and AIDS organizations have information and help to offer.

At your public library

The public library should have information on AIDS/HIV. To save time, you could ask the librarian to help you find the books quickly.

From family or friends

You can talk to your spouse or partner. There may be a person in your family or a friend who knows about health issues. He or she may know how to find information or help in your community.

At the doctor's office

Your doctor should have books about AIDS, sexuality and talking with your children. Ask your doctor where to look for more information.

AIDS Hotlines

Most places in Canada have a toll-free number to call for information or help about AIDS/HIV. They can find someone in your community to help you.

Local clergy

Many places of worship have organized information and support services. Your local clergy may be able to help you.

Read about AIDS and sexuality

About AIDS:

1. AIDS: What Every Responsible Canadian Should Know

by J.D. Grieg

This book provides information about AIDS, sex and related issues in a question-answer format.

2. Living with AIDS and HIV

by David Miller

This book provides practical advice on dealing with the problems of people who have HIV or AIDS.

3. Sex, Drugs and AIDS

by Oralea Wachter

This "magazine style" book will appeal to young people.

About talking with your children about sexuality:

1. Changing Bodies, Changing Lives

by Ruth Bell

This book has been updated in 1988 to include information on birth control, AIDS, drug abuse, and suicide.

2. Raising a Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World

by Sol and Judith Gordon

This book contains lots of sound advice about good communications.

3. Talk to Me

by Beth Reis and Barbara McGuire

This series of six booklets helps parents and young people "interview" each other about sex, love and life. The "interviews" encourage good listening and discourage interruptions.

4. Does AIDS Hurt? Educating Young Children about AIDS

by Marcia Quackenbush and Sylvia Villarreal

This book describes the questions and concerns of young children (up to 10 years old) about AIDS. Practical advice is given to parents, teachers and others in responding to these questions.

5. How to Talk to Your Child about Sexuality: A Parent's Guide

from Planned Parenthood

This book presents basic facts and ways to deal with difficult topics such as masturbation, sexually transmitted diseases, homosexuality and child sexual abuse.

About talking with your children:

1. **How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk**

by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

This book describes how to talk with your children and change their behavior. Practical suggestions are illustrated and explained in an interesting way.

2. **Ourselves and Our Children**

from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective

A reassuring book which helps parents with the tough job of parenting.

3. **P.E.T. (Parent Effective Training)**

by T. Gordon

This book is an excellent resource for parents on communicating with their children.

NOTE: These books are considered, by educators, to be useful for parents. However, Health and Welfare Canada does not necessarily agree with everything in them.

Have your children read about **AIDS and sexuality**

Pre-School and Primary School

1. Where Did I Come From?

by Peter Mayle

This colourful, illustrated book provides answers for both children (ages 4 to 9) and parents.

2. How Was I Born? by L. Nilsson

This book uses photography and warm family scenes to describe reproduction and birth. This is an excellent book for parents to read to their children.

3. Girls Are Girls and Boys Are Boys

by Sol Gordon

This book shows that stereotyping boys and girls into one rigid set of roles is wrong. It also provides information about birth, contraception, intercourse, feelings, and puberty. Best for ages 5 and older.

Pre-Teens

1. What's Happening to Me?

by Peter Mayle

This book is for children ages 8 to 14 and provides simple, clear answers to children's questions.

2. The Changing Me

by D. Edens

This book is part of a series on Sexuality in Christian Living and is for 9- to 11-year-olds. It is intended for Christian parents who want their children to have the facts about sexuality within a traditional religious upbringing.

3. Am I Normal: An Illustrated Guide to Your Changing Body and

Dear Diary: An Illustrated Guide to Your Changing Body

by Jeanne Betancourt

Based on two films, these two books describe two weeks in the lives of a boy and a girl. In those two weeks, these pre-teens learn about puberty from a variety of sources. A video is available for home use.

4. Understanding the Facts of Life

by Susan Meredith

A very direct book which will help reduce the worry of young people. Contains a section on AIDS/HIV.

Teens

1. **AIDS: What Young Adults Should Know**

by Dr. William L. Yarber

This book has been published widely in Canada and the United States. It presents the facts about AIDS/HIV in a straightforward manner.

2. **Changing Bodies, Changing Lives**

by Ruth Bell

This is a good book for teens who like to read.

3. **Dear Doctor**

by Saul Levine and Dr. Kathleen Wilson

Based on The Toronto Star's column "Youth Clinic", this book covers a wide range of concerns in a question-and-answer format.

NOTE: These books are considered, by educators, as good resources for parents and children. However, Health and Welfare Canada does not necessarily agree with everything in them.

Try these activities with your children

1. Watch a television show together.

Invite your child to join you in watching a television show by saying, "There's a special on TV about AIDS tonight, I'd like to watch it with you, okay?"

During the show, write down some of the things you would like to talk about. Ask your child to do the same.

2. Find a special time or place to be together often!

Find a regular time to be with each of your children. (It doesn't have to be a "big deal" – driving to school, eating breakfast together, cookies and milk after school, a walk after supper or a regular activity on a Sunday afternoon are all good times.)

Introduce the topic of AIDS during those regular times.

3. Do research about AIDS/HIV together.

Sometimes when a child asks about AIDS (or other topics), it can be fun to do a research project together.

The project doesn't have to be a big one – a visit to the public library or health clinic can be all it takes.

Make it special by going out for a snack together after you have finished.

4. Find out what each of you knows – conduct "interviews" together.

Sometimes listening is the hardest part of talking with your child. Often it is too easy for the parent to interrupt the child. Conducting "interviews" is a way in which both people get a chance to talk.

First, both of you should write down a list of questions that you want to ask.

Second, make a date and time when you will do the "interview".

Third, pick a quiet place where you won't be interrupted by others.

Fourth, make it special by bringing a snack.

During the "interview", don't rush. Feel free to say, "I don't want to answer that question." Stop when you get tired. Talk about how you feel. Remember, only one person is being interviewed at one time.

5. Read the same book together.

A good way to start a discussion about AIDS or sexuality is to find a good book and give it to your child to read.

Set a time for when you plan to discuss the book.

Ask your teen to read this

Dear Teenager,

This book is for parents but we want you to read at least this page.

We tried to help parents talk with you about AIDS. But it's hard to talk about AIDS without talking about sex. Talking about sex makes most of us nervous or at least a little embarrassed. So many parents (and young people) avoid the topic.

You need to know about AIDS. Your parents are good people to talk with about AIDS. You can also get information from your school, local health clinic, doctor's office, and other places in your community. Please do so – for your sake.



Now, about talking with your parents...

Talking with parents can be difficult. Particularly when it's about sex, drugs, or other things that your parents want to avoid. So here are some ideas on how you can handle your parents.

1. Be patient.

Remember, your parents are probably feeling a little nervous or awkward about the topics of AIDS and sex. They are still learning too. They don't have all the answers, but they can help you find them.

2. Try to relax.

It's O.K. if you feel nervous – that's normal.

3. Try to start the conversation.

Use TV shows, news reports or movies as a way to bring up the subject. Encourage them by saying "thanks" after they have answered a question or after you have had a good discussion with them.

4. Know when to "cool it".

Sometimes parents will get upset in the middle of a discussion (it's usually because they are worried about you). So, before you start a discussion, establish a rule that either of you can call a "time out" so that you can both calm down. Say, "I know this is really important, but I think we're both getting upset. Can we talk about this tomorrow when I get home from school?"

5. Try to use the medical words.

Sometimes young people only know certain words for parts of the body or for sexual activity. Unfortunately, these words sometimes upset parents. If you don't know the proper word say, "I am going to use this word because I don't know the medical one – okay?"

6. Review the "Let's Talk about Talking" section of this booklet together.

Before you begin to discuss AIDS and sex, read and discuss some of the suggestions in this booklet.

Be active in your community

Individual parents can change things in their community so that the risk of AIDS/HIV is reduced for their children. Here are a few ideas.



At work

- Ask that an information session be organized.
- Make sure your company has a policy on AIDS/HIV.



In your local newspaper

- Ask the editor to include articles on AIDS/HIV.



At your doctor's office

- Make sure pamphlets are available.



At home

- Talk with your children about AIDS/HIV.
- Watch a TV show about AIDS/HIV with your children.



At your health clinic

- Make sure confidential testing for HIV is available.
- Make sure counselling on AIDS and sexuality is available.



At your service club

- Organize an information session for your group about AIDS/HIV.
- Organize a fundraising activity.



At the local college or university

- Ask that a course on parenting and sexuality be offered.
- Make sure counselling and information on AIDS and sexuality are available.



At school

- Organize an information session for parents.
- Ensure the school has an AIDS/sexuality program.
- Make sure referrals to trained nurses are available.



At the hospital

- Make sure the public health official is conducting an education program.
- Make sure special care and treatment are available for people with HIV infection or AIDS.

